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Concerning Right Effort

By David Dale Holmes Buddhistdoor Global | 2017-05-12 |

Right Effort is the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. If you are to reach a supramundane state, you must realize it through effort of the mind.

So what is Right Effort?

It is an effort that no one can make for you; you must do it for yourself. It means making an effort to arouse the energy of the mind and focusing it on cleansing the mind of its impurities, through self-discipline, so that it may be liberated to work on a supramundane level.

This may sound like an exercise of mind over matter, but it is not as difficult as it may appear. The Buddha explains Right Effort in systematic, disciplined steps, which Bhikkhu Bodhi's book *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering* (1984) outlines as follows.

In Anguttara Nikaya IV 13-14, the Buddha says we must practice mental control:

First, prevent the arising of unwholesome mental states before they are awakened, which is to say we must stem the arising of the five hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, dullness, restlessness, and doubt before they arise, so that they are not awakened.

These are explained as follows:

1. Sensual desire means lust for pleasurable states: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches. Or for wealth, power, position, fame, and their accompanying pleasures.
2. Ill will means hatred, anger, resentment, and repulsion.
3. Dullness means mental inertia and accompanying drowsiness or mental sinking into heaviness of the mind.
4. Restlessness or worry refers to states of agitation, excitement, frenzy, or stress, which keep the mind from focusing.
5. Doubt means a lack of resolution and indecisiveness, which hinders right effort.

The antidote is to block the five hindrances before they have a chance to arise in the mind. This is a form of Buddhist meditation: to watch the workings of the mind and check the five hindrances before they arise. To “nip them in the bud,” so to speak, though—if one analyzes carefully—one sees that to “sever at the root” would be a more appropriate analogy. You have to watch the workings of your mind and when you observe one of the five hindrances in the process of arising, you have to catch it and drive it out.

The secret is to check uncontrolled responses with controlled responses. The goal is to evoke the opposite response; for example, equanimity and focus in the place of unfulfilled desire and agitation.

Practice this for long enough, and you begin to feel the positive effects of mind control—which becomes reason enough to keep doing it. When this is working, it is time to consider the next step.

Second, prevent the arising of unwholesome mental states: replace unwholesome thoughts with equal and opposite thoughts, the way the carpenter uses a new wooden peg to drive out an old one. A device you can use when your mind is agitated by a stressful worrying thoughts is to say: “I drive out this old peg with a new peg,” and picture a new peg pushing out the old one. So the picture in your mind will replace the worrying thought and push it out. This is a simple trick, but it works.

In fact, there are many forms of Buddhist meditation that replace unwholesome thoughts with wholesome ones. The Buddha taught his disciples how to ward off unwanted attachment to objects of the senses, replacing or pushing them out with thoughts of the impermanence of life or with thoughts of change, deterioration and decay of the body. Such meditation subjects are good antidotes for those who are stuck on gratification of the senses.

Loving-kindness meditation is a good antidote for hate, aversion, rancor, and so on.

Meditating on a ball of light is a good antidote to counteract dullness, drowsiness, and mental inertia.

Breath meditation is an antidote for calming an agitated mind.

Investigative analysis or inquiry is a good antidote for doubt.

Yet another device for countering unwanted thoughts is to direct the mind away from an unwholesome thought, the way you might look away from an undesirable sight or change the subject when an undesirable topic of conversation is brought up. Catch the thought and change the subject.

Monks may change the topic when sensual and unsavory questions are raised. It is not that they want to avoid a question that is difficult to answer. Avoiding the topic is the answer—which the questioner may understand if she is perceptive.

Third, arouse unarisen wholesome thoughts. Strive to stop unwanted mental states from arising, and strive to replace them with wholesome mental states. The Buddha is very specific about how this works. He explains the Seven Steps of Enlightenment as follows:

1. Mindfulness
2. Investigation
3. Energy
4. Rapture
5. Tranquillity
6. Concentration
7. Equanimity

1. Through mindfulness in meditation, clear the mind of delusion and wandering, and focus clearly on objects of nature in the now.

2. Through inquiry or investigation, analyze the true nature of phenomena. In other words, once you see the object of thought clearly, make a new step to investigate its nature: “What is this thing, really, which fascinates me so much?”

3. Quicken the energy of the effort of your inquiry, shaking off lethargy and inertia, awaking enthusiasm, gathering momentum, and using perseverance, so the power of motion overcomes inertia and cannot be stopped. You push hard until you have overcome all obstacles, and you see the true nature of things, the way they really are, without delusion.

4. Enthusiasm builds to rapture, ascending to ecstatic heights, but this is a rapture that is accompanied by an excitement and restlessness of mind which needs to calm down until that restlessness is subdued.

5. Rapture then becomes a tranquility in which the work of contemplation proceeds with self-possessed serenity.

6. Tranquility brings concentration to ripeness and the seeker achieves one-pointed unification of mind.

7. The final state is one of equanimity in which the mind, through deepening concentration, free from inertia and excitement, becomes balanced and stays that way on its own, without effort or restraint, watching the play of phenomena.

This brings us to the last step in the discipline of Right Effort.

Fourth, maintain arisen wholesome thoughts. What this means is to guard the balance of the mind and concentrate on the positive state, so it is not lost but continues on constantly, at the forefront of the mind, until the mind reaches its ultimate goal or fulfillment. In other words, keeping the mind controlled and directed on positive states.

Developing a positive balance of the mind necessitates constant effort. It’s easier to lose that balance than it is to achieve it, so it takes focused energy of mind to maintain it. (see Bodhi 57–69, 1984).

References

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Abandoning the wrong factors of the path

"One tries to abandon wrong view & to enter into right view: This is one's right effort..."

"One tries to abandon wrong resolve & to enter into right resolve: This is one's right effort..."

"One tries to abandon wrong speech & to enter into right speech: This is one's right effort..."

"One tries to abandon wrong action & to enter into right action: This is one's right effort..."

"One tries to abandon wrong livelihood & to enter into right livelihood: This is one's right effort."

— MN 117

Like fine-tuning a musical instrument

As Ven Sona was meditating in seclusion [after doing walking meditation until the skin of his soles was split & bleeding], this train of thought arose in his awareness: "Of the Blessed One's disciples who have aroused their persistence, I am one, but my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance. Now, my family has enough wealth that it would be possible to enjoy wealth & make merit. What if I were to disavow the training, return to the lower life, enjoy wealth, & make merit?"

Then the Blessed One, as soon as he perceived with his awareness the train of thought in Ven. Sona's awareness — as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or bend his outstretched arm — disappeared from Vulture Peak Mountain, appeared in the Cool Wood right in front of Ven. Sona, and sat down on a prepared seat. Ven. Sona, after bowing down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Just now, as you were meditating in seclusion, didn't this train of thought appear to your awareness: 'Of the Blessed One's disciples who have aroused their persistence, I am one, but my mind is not released from the effluents... What if I were to disavow the training, return to the lower life, enjoy wealth, & make merit?'"

"Yes, lord."

"Now what do you think, Sona. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the vina?"

"Yes, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned (lit: 'established') to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune ('penetrate,' 'ferret out') the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme."

"Yes, lord," Ven. Sona answered the Blessed One. Then, having given this exhortation to Ven. Sona, the Blessed One — as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or bend his outstretched arm — disappeared from the Cool Wood and appeared on Vulture Peak Mountain.

So after that, Ven. Sona determined the right pitch for his persistence, attuned the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there picked up his theme. Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Sona became another one of the arahants.